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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

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WHAT IS DHYANA?

Lecture given by Master Sheng-Yen, May 27, 1984

"Virtuous men, if after awakening to the pure nature of complete enlightenment, these Bodhisattvas using this pure Bodhi mind grasp at neither illusions and transformations, nor all states of stillness, they will see clearly that body and mind are hindrances. They will be freed from basic ignorance. They will not cling to abstractions, and they will forever be beyond both hindering and non-hindering states. They will feel comfortable and at ease in the use of body, mind, and universe. While still in the phenomenal world they will be like the far-reaching sound of a musical instrument, for neither pleasure nor nirvana will obstruct them any longer. Then inwardly they will experience a lightness of body and mind, and they will feel at ease in that state of stillness, that state of extinction of passion. Thus this stage of wonderful enlightenment will be in harmony with the condition of nirvana which is beyond body and mind, beyond the conception of an ego, a personality, wherein a being, or life, is just a passing thought. This experience is called Dhyana."

This passage is from the Sutra of Complete Enlightenment. In that sutra the Bodhisattvas ask the Buddha about methods of practice. He answers that there are three categories: samatha, samapatti, and dhyana. The first two have previously been discussed. It should also be noted that here the meaning of the word dhyana is not exactly the same as the term dhyana used in the Indian tradition.

In the Lankavatara Sutra it is said that genuine Buddha-dharma is apart from the form of any words, any language. "Words and language" refers not to a specialized meaning taking the ordinary usage of the word, but to the general meaning of anything that can be expressed, received, communicated, represented either through our usual words and language, or

through our various senses. What we can see, what we can perceive, what with our mouth we can express in words, or can write, what meanings we express with our body gestures, body language; all this would be included in the general interpretation of "words and language."

The Lankavatara Sutra also says that genuine Buddhadharma is apart from any form of mental activity - that includes our feeling which gives rise to our thinking. With regard to the mental activities of feeling and thinking, certain symbols have to be used. The words that we have, the language that we have, the certain kinds of shapes, or whatever - using these symbols we can have our feelings, our thinking. And whenever we are using these symbols and having these mental activities, regardless of whether our mental stage is a unified or a scattered mind, this state cannot be called pure. When there is no mental activity whatsoever, only then is a mental state pure.

Returning from Taiwan via the Korean airline, Shih-fu sat next to an American missionary going to Korea from Taiwan. This person asked Shih-fu what religion he practiced. Shih-fu said, "Buddhism." The missionary found it somewhat funny. Looking through the airline magazine he came upon an article about the various religions in Korea. With regard to Buddhism it mentioned a certain temple, a monastery in Korea with a thousand Buddha statues. The missionary showed the picture to Shih-fu, saying, "O.K., this is the religion you believe in - isn't that true?" Shih-fu said, "Indeed so." Again the man laughed at it.

"These Buddha statues are made of wood," he said, pointing at them. "Do you believe they are God?" Shih-fu said, "Well, I do not believe in any god." And the person asked, "What do you believe in?" Shih-fu said, "So far as I am concerned, I don't believe in anything. But Buddhism does use these statues." The missionary said, "These statues were made from wood. Do you believe that they are made from wood?" Shih-fu said, "Indeed I believe that the statues are made from wood." Then the person wanted to know, "Well, since these statues are made from wood, do you think they are of any use at all?" Shih-fu replied, "There are people who can benefit from having these statues around; hence Buddhism does make use of these statues."

This exchange happened at a time shortly after the Pope had visited Korea, so the magazine, on the opposite page, talked about Catholicism in that country. There were churches, with a cross. Now it was Shih-fu's turn. He pointed at the cross and said, "Is this the religion that you believe in?" The missionary answered, "Yes." Shih-fu said, "Do you believe that the cross here is God?" The man gave thought to it, and replied, "God is not something that can be represented by such a physical form. The cross is only a symbol." So Shih-fu responded, "In that case, what you said about the use of having the cross in the church is very similar to what I said about having the statues in the temples."

Then the missionary objected, saying, "No. The statue is a symbol of God's love for mankind, so Jesus is on the cross. But if people were to prostrate, or pay respect to idols, that would be a sin." Then Shih-fu said, "But according to Buddhist sutras

it is not necessary to pay respect to the cross." And the person stated, "What you say is not correct. According to the Christian Bible, to pay respect to statues, idols, is wrong, is a sin." Shih-fu said, "In that case, if your base is according to your Christian Bible, and you say that what I do is wrong, then equally I can be based upon Buddhist sutras and say that for you to pay respect to the cross is wrong, is equally a sin. Like that we will always be quarrelling, and we will never get across with each other. I know that it's only because you have faith in your religion that you became a Christian, became a Catholic. You should also understand that it is because I have faith that I became a Buddhist. So each of us has our foundation. You base it on your Christian Bible and I base it on the Buddhist sutras."

Another time a Catholic father once told Shih-fu that on the highest level God is formless - God does not require persons to pay respect or have adoration for God. It is very natural for God to love people, but God does not demand that people should also love God, because people basically have ignorance. To say that it is necessary for people to pay respect to God, is only because of the need of people themselves.

Shih-fu answered the father, "Well, according to what you just said, Catholic ideas are very close to Buddhism." Nonetheless, the ideas expressed by that Catholic father are not those typical of common Catholicism. So why does Shih-fu get into those examples? He is trying to point out that they have to do with using different kinds of forms, descriptions, words and language. All opposition between different religions comes from these attachments to certain concepts, to certain forms, to certain descriptions; however, if we are going to talk about the 3rd category of this method of practice - dhyana - then all concepts, all forms of description, words and language, have to be left behind.

When it finally came time to part from the American missionary, Shih-fu told him, "Speaking for myself, I would say that I do not have to deny the existence of God. And also, for Buddhists there are indeed Buddhas. But again, I do not believe in Buddhas." The man was surprised. He asked, "How can it be possible for a Buddhist not to believe in Buddhas?" Shih-fu said, "It's nothing surprising. It's not just for me - it will be the same for anyone who has done sufficient practice in Buddhadharma. That is, all Buddhas are people of the past. Whether there are any Buddhas now at this moment is irrelevant to me. All Buddhists who have done sufficient practice would not hold any attachment to Buddhas. Not only non-Buddhists will find it surprising that genuine Buddhists do not have to believe in Buddhas, but even a lot of Buddhists who do not understand what Ch'an is, will find this surprising, or even repelling."

Once, when Shih-fu was holding a Ch'an retreat in Taiwan, he said something to this effect: "There's no Buddha, there's no Bodhisattva, there's no Pure Land, there are no dieties. You are not allowed to think of anything like these. You just ask yourself where you came from before your present life, where you're going to after this life, what you are at this moment."

(WHAT IS DHYANA? will be continued in the next Newsletter)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

During the 2nd week after his return to Taiwan, Shih-fu phoned again to say hello to everyone. He was tired after retreat, but he was well.

Two statues have been offered to the Center. Mr. Dha Kwa, originally from Nepal, paid us a visit and donated a Buddha image which now sits on the main altar. Ernest Heau has given us his beautiful antique sculpture of Earth Store Bodhisattva (Ksitigarbha or Ti Tsang Wang Pu Sa).

The Center library has been moved to a larger and more suitable room next door to the old one, and more books have recently been donated.

At the end of August a small group from the Center visited Karma Kriyana Dharma Chakra at Woodstock. Ching Hai Shih was given a small statue containing a relic of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa.

A delegation from the Center participated in the Sept. 2nd celebrations at the Mahayana Temple near Woodstock, and Rev. Thich Nguyen An made a brief visit to us. Ching Hai Shih and Kuo Hwei paid a return visit to his temple in Chinatown where they had the privilege of bowing to a beautiful relic of the Venerable Master Hsu Yun.

A group from the Center will be going to pay their respects to His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Sept. 23 in New Jersey. Whoever wishes to join us should contact the Center as soon as possible.



The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

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